

Me? An Evangelist? - Sermon #2: I Don't Know Who!

Luke 5:27-32

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We continue our discussion of evangelism today with our second sermon in this series. If you remember, last week we talked about what it takes to be an evangelist, and our job description boiled down to one requirement: be yourself. We took our cue from Jesus' words, as he told us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

But even the saltiest of salts is completely useless if it's left in the shaker, so today we're going to talk about how we can take the God-light that is inside each of us and begin to share it with others. Next week, we'll talk about what we would say to those people. But today we're asking this: On whom might we shine that God-light inside us? Who do we know that needs to hear the good news?

In "Becoming a Contagious Christian," Bill Hybels recommends making what he calls an Impact List, which is a list of people you know who don't go to church. Hybels says this list is important because it keeps the idea of sharing the good news with these people on the front of our minds, and it keeps us praying for them, which is crucial. As one author said, "You have to talk to God about people before you talk to people about God." Prayer is a powerful evangelistic tool.

So is opportunity. We may be friends with someone for years, or for only a few hours, when the right time arises to invite that person to church. The key is our staying open to those opportunities. We don't have to rush it or force anything on people, but we should stay sensitive to their questions and inquiries that might open a door for us to share the good news or our own experiences. We have to be open to those opportunities, and courageous enough to take advantage of them.

So who do we put on our impact lists? I want to propose four categories of people who make excellent candidates for all us evangelists. I believe that within these categories, we can each find at least one person who needs to hear some good news.

The first category is people you know. This is the easiest one, because, well, we already know them! This can be anyone with whom we already have a relationship – family, friends, coworkers, neighbors. Hybels says the best way to reach businessmen is through other businessmen; the best way to reach retired people is through other retired people; the best way to reach teens is through other teens. Mike Rodbro told me that dentists reach out to other dentists by singing hymns. In fact, Lynda Gonzales told me the most effective one is, "Crown Him with Many Crowns." We're most likely to have the highest success rate with these people because the relationship we share with the person is essential in our ability to talk with them about spiritual matters.

I think this is why the door-to-door evangelism techniques are so off-putting. I don't want to talk religion with someone I don't know and trust. That has to be earned. As we build that trust and common ground, our relationship grows deeper and deeper until we feel comfortable enough to talk about things that are most personal. We all have those kinds of relationships with people, and if some of those people are not churchgoers, that's fertile ground for evangelism.

The passage from Luke gives us one example of this. Levi the tax collector is so excited about being called by Jesus that he throws a big party and invites all his tax

collector friends. We go to parties, we share meals, we golf together, we go to our kids' sporting events together. Those are perfect times in the midst of those relationships to extend an invitation.

Kevin is still on my impact list. Kevin is my best friend in the world. He was my best man at my wedding, and I later officiated at his wedding. Kevin is one of the few people to whom I can tell anything, because I know he will receive it without judgment. Kevin is one of the first people I told about going into ministry, and despite his own lack of belief, he was 100 percent supportive. Kevin had a negative experience at a church growing up, and refuses to go back. Kevin says the only way he'll go to church is if he wins the lottery and builds the First Church of Kory and I become his pastor. I told him my boss frowns on that kind of thing. I try to witness to Kevin simply by the way I live my life and the choices I make, but I know there will be other times in our lives when Kevin and I will talk directly about faith. I pray that one of those times it becomes more than just talk for him. Kevin's on my list.

The second category of people is people we used to know. This is a great way to reconnect with past relationships. You wouldn't necessarily call someone specifically for the purpose of inviting them to church, but that could be a nice benefit of rekindling that relationship. Are there people in your past whom you'd like to talk with again, people you've lost touch with over the years? Maybe this is the time to track them down and let them know someone's thinking about them.

Maria Henriques is on my impact list. I worked with Maria at the newspaper in Louisville. We got to be friends, but I lost touch with her after she moved to the Washington, D.C. area. Right before Christmas, she sent out a mass email Christmas card, so I wrote her back to see how she was doing. She seemed less than happy and is considering a career change. She seems to be going through a crossroads in her life. When I told her I was a pastor, she mentioned that she had started picking up the Bible again. Maria is searching for something. And wouldn't you know it! Guess where I'm going to be from Jan. 31 to Feb. 1: At a church conference in Washington, D.C. Some people would call that a coincidence, but I know better. I'm going to try and get together with Maria. Maria is on my impact list.

The third category of people is people you'd like to know. These are people that you may have a passing acquaintance with, but would like to get to know better. Maybe it's a neighbor, or a coworker, or the parent of one of your children's friends.

When considering people you'd like to know, Hybels encourages using the "Barbecue First Principle." He tells the story of a couple in his church that had some new neighbors, so after a few casual meetings and waving across the fences they invited the new couple to church. There was a weird silence as the couple looked at each other, and the man awkwardly said, "Um, well, maybe next time...but if you'd like to come over for a barbecue, we'd love to have you!"

The Barbecue First Principle means that before you can address a topic as personal as church, you have to spend some time with the people, you have to get to know them as people, not just potential church members. Hybels calls this paying relational rent. As we get to know more about them, and them about us, we move from the surface topics to things that really matter.

Pete and Kathy are on my impact list. Pete and Kathy moved in next door to us last summer. They have two kids, Shannon and Stephen, both around Sydney's age. They

are also expecting their third child. Leigh told me that when she told Kathy that I was a minister, Kathy said, “Uh-oh. He won’t like us. We don’t go to church.” On the contrary, I like them both very much. I’m praying that God will show Leigh and I how we can be helpful to them when the baby arrives. I’m praying that we have more chances to get to know each other. Who knows how God can work in that situation? Pete and Kathy are on my impact list.

There’s one more category of people, but it’s a harder one to define. It’s people you don’t know, or at least don’t know yet. On my impact list, there’s a big question mark there, because I have no idea who this will be, who God might send across my path. This one is also the hardest one personally for me, because I’m not always as open as I should be to meeting new people. If I’m on a plane, I make sure my nose is buried in a book. If I’m in a waiting room, I make sure I have something to occupy my time, so that the message being sent is, “I’m busy, don’t bother me.”

After reading “Becoming a Contagious Christian,” I took a hard look at myself and realized I wasn’t being as open as God wanted me to be. So I tried an experiment. I decided that when I was around people I didn’t know, I wasn’t going to close any doors. I might even be so bold as to strike up a conversation.

A few days after that, I was getting my oil changed, and another guy walked in and sat down across from me. I summoned courage for places within me I didn’t even know existed, and with bravery usually reserved only for gladiator movies, I said, “Hey.” And he said, “Hey.” And we ended up talking for about 15 minutes. He was a home builder in the area, and most of our conversation was his profanity-laced tales of bad building experiences. We never got around to talking about me, which was fine, because after his word choices I was afraid to tell him I was a pastor! We never talked about church or God or anything like that. We just talked.

I’ve been try to do more of that lately. Just talking with people. Still haven’t had a chance to invite anyone to our church. I may not for several years, or I may tomorrow. Who knows when the time will come and the opportunity will arise and talk will turn from the weather and the kids to something more meaningful. We have to be on the lookout, because who knows?

I pray for Kevin. I pray for Bill. I pray for Roy. I pray for that unknown person. That’s whose on my impact list. Who’s on yours?